

Jewish Identity In Hebrew Enlightenment Literature -- Isaac Euchel: Happiness Without The Commandments

By Moshe Pelli

The foremost representative of early Hebrew Enlightenment literature is Isaac Euchel (1756-1804). In his prolific literary career, he was an editor of the first Hebrew periodical, *Hame'asef*, a biographer of Moses Mendelssohn, and a playwright. In 1790, he published a literary piece in *Hame'asef* which he titled, "The Letters of Meshulam ben Uriah Ha'eshtemo'i." The "Letters" are an epistolary satire, somewhat similar to Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (*Persian Letters*) and to many other works of the Epistolary genre which flourished in Europe in the eighteenth century. A Hebrew critic (Letteris) expressed his view on "The Letters of Meshulam," saying that "they are more precious than pure gold."

The story is simple, yet quite meaningful in context of our topic. In 1769, a eighteen-year-old youth, Meshulam, is sent by his father, Uriyah Ha'eshtemo'i, from Syria to Europe in order to learn "the customs of the people of these countries and their disposition." Meshulam goes to Spain with a Marrano Jew. There he becomes acquainted with the unique yet limited way in which the Marranos observe Judaism in secrecy. Later he broadens his horizons by getting a glimpse into the Christian way of worship which was completely new to him. He also pays a visit to the Jewish community in Italy which was known to be traditional, yet rather modern in its observance of Judaism. Thus Meshulam is exposed to a few customs and traditions in Europe.

During this time he receives two letters from home, one from his grandfather, and the other from his father. Each advises him which is the right way that he should conduct himself as a Jew. Grandfather is very strict in the observance of the *Mitzvot*, the commandments. Uncompromising even with regard to minor customs, grandfather expresses the view of traditional Judaism. He demands that Meshulam follow his kind of Judaism. Meshulam's father, on the other hand, is more modern in his approach. He tends to be more lenient in religious observance, and in general is more enlightened than grandfather. Meshulam must now choose between the two interpretations of Judaism.

Meshulam represents the Jewish *maskil* [an enlightened Jew] as a young, searching man. He searches for his own identity, and for his own intellectual, spiritual, and religious image. The very search itself, and the fact that the protagonist is sent on a mission to study the customs of other peoples -- outside of normative, traditional Judaism, and outside of Jewish civilization, is by itself an indication of a growing discontent that was taking place in the Hebrew circles of the enlighteners. The beginning

of the search is the beginning of change, for it represents the conviction -- typical to secular Judaism in the last two hundred years -- that Jewish civilization, as it had been known through the ages, was no longer self-sufficient.

Meshulam is also the embodiment of the literary concept of the noble savage. However, unlike the noble savage in European literature who is supposed to expose the corruption of European society, its institutions and its religion, Meshulam exposes the alleged inferiority of traditional Judaism in comparison to the supposedly superior European culture. This notion, which gained ground during the period of Hebrew Enlightenment, has undergone drastic changes in the course of the eventful history in our century.

Euchel employs a symbolic act, which Meshulam performs, in order to signify his point. Immediately at the beginning of his tour, Meshulam changes his clothes; he takes off his oriental garments, replacing them with western ones. This act should not be underestimated. Its broad symbolic and cultural implication can be better understood when we examine it against the classical Jewish sources. A Midrash about the Exodus from Egypt states that the Israelites deserved to be saved from bondage because they had not relinquished three fundamental aspects of their identity: their names, their clothes, and their language. The Midrash emphasizes the importance of these external signs of identity. It stresses an individual's need to adhere to a culture -- his own culture -- in order to achieve social, spiritual, and religious independence. It is significant to note that contemporary Hebrew literature is still engaged in the same themes, as it tries to define the components of our Jewish identity.

I would like to point out that by letting Meshulam change his clothes, Euchel is far from advocating assimilation in any form or shape. To be sure, he does not preach Jewish isolationism either. Being a rationalist, Euchel examines the heritage of the past and determines for himself what suits his time and place best. Being an enlightener, Euchel would like to expose himself and his people to European culture and learning, as he himself endeavored to do when he studied under the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. He no longer considers the Jewish milieu as self-contained and self-sufficient, and it is his firm conviction that both Judaism and the Jews must conform to the standards of European society, if they wish to become full-fledged, equal citizens. This rationale of Hebrew Enlightenment did change one hundred years later as the focus of Judaism changed toward Jewish nationalism.

Meshulam, therefore, represents the search of Haskalah [Hebrew Enlightenment] for the golden mean between Judaism and European culture. He rejects the strict, uncompromising, traditional Judaism of the past which is represented by his grandfather, although Meshulam does show respect for it. Meshulam is attracted to moderation in Judaism, to openness and tolerance which are manifested in the figure of Meshulam's father. Meshulam ostensibly adopts his father's stand concerning Judaism, but only externally and temporarily, for he himself is full of skepticism and doubt. Through the literary figure of Meshulam, Euchel raises tantalizing questions. One question epitomizes the most crucial problem of Jewish identity throughout the past two centuries. Is it possible, he asks, for a Jew to be happy and maintain his integrity without the observance of the religious commandments? The problem, according to Euchel, is as follows: How could a Jew retain his identity as a Jew while attempting to adopt the non-religious aspects of European culture? The question indicates that although Meshulam agrees, at least for the time being, with his father's interpretation of Judaism, he can no longer accept ready-made answers about his own identity. Empirically oriented, he must experiment for himself; he must also experience as an individual Jew what it means to be outside the spheres of normative, traditional Judaism.

Meshulam's rather positive attitude toward the limited version of Judaism, as practiced and observed by the Marranos, signifies, perhaps, Euchel's literary way of telling us how he sees his religion and his culture in the age of Enlightenment. Significantly, Meshulam rejects his grandfather's Judaism in favor of the Marranos' more purified, refined, and limited version. In Euchel's story, the Marranos observe some of the major holidays, but most of them do not observe the *mitzvot*, the commandments, at all. They believe that "worship in the heart" (*Avodah shebalev*) is the basic tenet of Judaism. Although Euchel does not elaborate on the Marrano theology, he presents it as a form of deistic, rationalistic Judaism. Deism refers to the eighteenth-century religious movement in Europe which tried to limit religious observance to the universal tenets of Natural Religion.

Euchel contributed a new image to Jewish identity in modern times. The new kind of Jew, the ideal Jew of the Enlightenment, living in ideal Jewish circumstances, is envisioned by this Hebrew author in his portrayal of the Italian Jews who live in peace among their neighbors and are respected by them. Their physical appearance is important. They are clean shaven, they grow their curly hair, as was the custom, and they do not differ in their clothes from the non-Jews. They speak Italian fluently and clearly, like any of the Italian poets. They are also erudite in other fields, and they are well-bred. This appears to be the new image of the modern Jew -- a modern Jewish identity.

In this context, Euchel introduces a very important concept in a form of an adage. He says: "The basis for the probe of man is man." It is a paraphrase, in Hebrew translation, of Alexander Pope's famous adage which is related to the Age of Enlightenment. Pope's adage reads: "The proper study of mankind is man." Euchel adopts European values, which in this case agree with the tenets of Judaism. It is no accident that Euchel lays so much emphasis on man. In his ideal portrayal of the Italian Jews there is hardly a reference to their Jewishness.

One suspects that Euchel adopted the ideology of another important writer of the Haskalah in Germany, Naphtali Herz Wessely. Wessely discussed the relations between Judaism and secular knowledge, between the Jew as a Jew and the Jew as a human being. Wessely stresses secular knowledge over traditional Judaism, and highlights the Jew primarily as a human being. As a matter of fact, he cites secular knowledge and humanism as being prerequisites for Judaism, as required for a person to possess so as to be a complete, and perhaps better, Jew. Thus, according to Wessely, Judaism in modern times becomes subservient to western civilization, so that it can no longer exist as an entity by itself. In the same vein, Wessely wrote, a Jew can be part of humanity if he lacks Judaism yet adheres to western culture; however, a Jew cannot be regarded as a Jew if he does not have secular knowledge even though he fully adheres to Judaism. It should be noted that Wessely retracted some of his views, insisted that he was misinterpreted, and possibly was unaware of the implication of some of his utterances which were cited above. Yet his views can best represent Euchel's stand as well as the viewpoint of the Hebrew enlighteners in general.

Euchel's Judaism is exemplified by an increase of secularism, an attachment to the values of European culture, and by some break with the traditional continuity of historical Judaism. Euchel and the other Hebrew enlighteners attempted to rediscover in Judaism what they had found best in European culture. A reinterpretation and a redefinition of Judaism is the crux of their work.

They wished to create and mold a new image of the modern Jew, in a way, to shape a new Jewish identity. It was their answer to the image of the Jew as portrayed in European writings for two millennia of anti-Jewish tendencies. The Hebrew enlighteners considered *Galut*, the state of Jewish exile, as the cause for the Jewish predicament. They took the antithesis of *Galut*, namely, the idea of a divine messianic redemption, and modified it into a secular, civil, and social solution of the Jewish problem. A this-worldly approach in defining Judaism and Jewish goals and aspiration was adopted by these enlighteners. It was supplemented by modernizing the concept of the uniqueness of Judaism and of the Jews as holders of the eternal truth of monotheism for the benefit of humanity. It is the notion of *Or lagoyim*, a light to the nations.

To Euchel, Jewish identity bears not the tone of the affirmative, but, rather, of the question mark. It means a continuous search, an everlasting probe into one's entity, which is in a constant state of flux. The answer which one may arrive at is only temporary as it becomes the basis for still further probing into one's spiritual, religious and cultural identity.

Even a cursory attempt of evaluation cannot ignore the inadequacies and the lack of a systematic view in

Euchel's presentation of Judaism. But these are the result of his literary medium. It is not always **what** he says that counts, but, rather, **how** he says it. The tone of skepticism weighs heavily in his work, signifying the trends of modern times. Historically speaking, this sensitive writer foresaw, some 200 years ago, the direction of modern Judaism and the modern Jew.